DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 110 HE 032 615

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TITLE Binge Drinking on College Campuses. ERIC Digest.

INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Washington, DC.; George Washington Univ., Washington, DC. Graduate School of Education and Human Development.

SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-HE-1999-7
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT ED99000036
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, N.W., Suite 630, Washington, DC 20036-1183; Tel: 800-773-3742 (Toll Free); Fax: 202-452-1844.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Alcohol Abuse; *College Students; Fraternities; Higher Education; Sororities; Student Characteristics
IDENTIFIERS *Binge Drinking; ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest discusses binge drinking on U.S. college campuses. Male binge drinking is defined as five or more drinks in a row one or more times during a 2-week period; female binge drinking is defined as four or more drinks in a row one or more times during a two-week period. A drink is defined as twelve ounces of beer or wine cooler, four ounces of wine, or a shot of liquor. A 1993 nationwide study of almost 18,000 college students revealed that 44% were binge drinkers. The strongest predictor for binge drinking was living in a sorority or fraternity house; 80% of sorority women and 86% of fraternity men living in Greek housing were binge drinkers. Wechsler has created a 12-step program for institutions to address the alcohol problem on their campuses. Northern Illinois University has used a social influence campaign to curb binge drinking on its campus. (JM)

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ERIC®-HE Digest Series EDO-HE-1999-7 1999
The George Washington University Department of Education

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ED 436 110

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HE 032 615

Binge Drinking On College Campuses

Karen Kellogg

The nation, and especially college campuses, was shaken by the death of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) student Scott Krueger in 1997. Freshman Scott Krueger died of alcohol poisoning with his blood-alcohol level at five times the drunken driving standard in Massachusetts. Reports from his fraternity brothers indicated that he had multiple drinks in a short period of time--he was binge drinking. The Krueger incident, along with incidents at LSU and other universities on the East coast, spurred national discussion about college alcohol abuse and more specifically, binge drinking (McCormick and Kalb, 1998).

Alcohol abuse has long been a problem on college campuses. Currently, approximately 85% of college students drink alcohol (Philpot, 1997). Countless surveys have been conducted and articles written about the effects of alcohol on college students. Other projects have been completed on alcohol education and programming efforts. Many scholars and practitioners have spent their careers looking at the physical, emotional and academic effects of alcohol abuse. In the last few years a specific type of alcohol abuse has come to the forefront—binge drinking. "The collegiate culture of drinking seems to be moving from keg parties to industrial-strength guzzling" (McCormick & Kalb, 1998). However, not until recently has there been a study conducted on binge drinking that illuminates its characteristics and the dangers it has on individual students and the campus community.

BINGE DRINKING

Binge drinking is defined as drinking "five or more drinks in a row one or more times during a two-week period for men, and four or more drinks in a row one or more times during a two-week period for women . . . and a drink is defined as a 12-ounce can or bottle of beer, a four ounce glass of wine, a 12-ounce bottle or can of wine cooler, or a shot of liquor taken straight or in a mixed drink" (Wechsler, 1996). In 1993, Henry Wechsler of the Harvard School of Public Health, conducted a nationwide study of almost 18,000 college students and their alcohol use, behaviors and opinions. This study provided the first comprehensive view of the widespread abuse of binge drinking by college students (Wechsler, 1996). There are several key findings about binge drinking from the study:

*Eighty-four percent (84%) of students surveyed drank alcohol during the school year with almost half, 44% categorized as binge drinkers and 19% as frequent binge drinkers.

*Thirty-three percent (33%) of schools surveyed qualified as high-binge drinking campuses. To be qualified for a high-binge drinking campus, more than half of the students responding to the survey had to indicate that they were binge drinkers.

*The strongest predictor for binge drinking was living in aorority or fraternity house. Eighty percent (80%) of sorority women and 86% of fraternity men living in Greek housing qualified as binge drinkers.

CHARACTERISTICS OF BINGE DRINKERS

According to Wechsler (1996), typical characteristics of binge drinkers include: male, fraternity and sorority members, white, under 24 years of age, involved in athletics, and students who socialize a great deal. White males were found to be the most likely group to binge drink and African-American females were the least likely to binge drink (Wechsler, 1996). Historically black colleges, women's colleges, commuter schools and schools in the western United States have less binge drinking (Philpot, 1997). Also, students involved in community service, the arts or studying a great deal were less likely to binge drink. Finally, less than half of binge drinkers considered religion an important part of their lives (Wechsler, 1996).

GREEK MEMBERSHIP AND BINGE DRINKING

Although contrary to the ideals and foundations of Greek membership, Wechsler (1996) found that Greek membership and living in Greek housing is the strongest single predictor of binge drinking. Rarely do fraternity and sorority members have a social activity when alcohol is not present. Alcohol plays a large part of the Greek socialization process. Greek members also believe that alcohol facilitates the brotherhood/sisterhood bonding process and enhances social activities. The social norms of Greek membership appear to greatly influence the attitudes and expectations of Greek members regarding alcohol use (Alva, 1998).

Students living in Greek residences were more likely than non-Greek students to indicate that partying and drinking are important collegiate activities. For many Greek students, binge drinking began in high school and continued throughout college. Of Greek men who lived in fraternity housing, 60% considered themselves binge drinkers in high school while only 38% of sorority women living in sorority houses participated in binge drinking in high school. Seventy-eight percent of resident fraternity members and 76% of resident sorority members who were not binge drinkers became binge drinkers in college, as compared to 32% of non-fraternity men and 25% of non-sorority women who did not binge drink in high school (Wechsler, Kuh & Davenport, 1996).

Of Greek women who lived in sorority houses, 80% were binge drinkers and of Greek men who lived in fraternity houses, 86% were binge drinkers. Both genders in Greek societies out-drank their non-Greek counterparts. Only 35% of non-Greek women participated in binge drinking and 45% of non-Greek men participated in binge drinking (Wechsler, 1996). Because of the alcohol abuse, residents of Greek housing reported many more drinking-related problems than non-Greek students. Drinking related problems included: hangovers, missing class, forgetting what they did the night before, sexual assault and unplanned sexual activity, damaging property, drunk driving, and doing something that they regretted (Wechsler, Kuh & Davenport, 1996).

Institutions should begin to examine the accountability, or lack thereof, that fraternities and sororities have to their members. Greek residents are more likely to tolerate drinking which is contrary to their founding principles. College administrators should hold Greeks and the national Greek organizations responsible for their actions. The strong culture of Greek organizations is a powerful force for its members. Administrators can implement several types of restrictions and guidelines to assist Greek members in transforming their culture. Some of these guidelines might include: deferring new member rushing until the sophomore year, increasing education efforts, implementing stronger alcohol policies and following through with appropriate sanctions when the alcohol policy is violated (Wechsler, Kuh & Davenport, 1996).

SECONDHAND EFFECTS OF BINGE DRINKING

Unfortunately, binge drinkers are not the only students who are affected by their behavior. Non-binge drinking students are being dramatically affected by their binge drinking friends and roommates. According to Wechsler (1996), on campuses where more than half of the students participate in binge drinking, 87% of students that live on campus have experienced some secondhand effects of binge drinking. This is also true, but at a lesser extent, at schools where less than one-third of students participate in binge drinking. Some of the most common secondhand effects of binge drinking include: being insulted or humiliated, experiencing unwanted sexual advances, having interrupted sleep and babysitting friends or roommates. It is clear that the secondhand effects of

binge drinking are widespread and impact the majority of college students (Wechsler, 1996).

THE TWELVE-STEP PROGRAM FOR INSTITUTIONS

Wechsler (1996) has created a twelve-step program for institutions to address the alcohol problem on their campuses. Simply stated, the twelve-steps include:

1. Assess the ways in which alcohol is affecting your college.
2. Admit that your college has an alcohol problem.
3. A systematic effort begins with the president.
4. Plan for a long-term effort.
5. Involve everyone in the solution.
6. Involve the local community in your efforts.
7. Establish the rights of non-binging students.
8. Target disruptive behavior for disciplinary action.
9. Address problem drinking at fraternities and sororities.
10. Provide a full-time education for a full-time tuition.
11. Encourage problem drinkers to seek help or treatment.
12. Freshman orientation should start long before students arrive on campus.

This program is not only designed for administrators, but for the entire campus community. The twelve-step program will not cure binge drinking and alcohol abuse overnight, but it is a place to start.

A SOCIAL INFLUENCE APPROACH TO PREVENTION

For years, campus administrators have tried to change student alcohol behavior by providing information and educating students about the consequences of alcohol abuse. Campuses have tried flashy advertising campaigns and gimmicks to get students to reduce the amount of alcohol they drink. Despite the best efforts of campus educators, students are not listening and the alcohol abuse continues to be a rite of passage for many students.

The latest in a long line of alcohol prevention programs targets the root of the problem—perceptions students have about drinking and other drinkers. The Social influence approach describes an effort to change the common beliefs students have about alcohol, binge drinking and their peers. In 1998, Northern Illinois University (NIU) received funding to expand its alcohol abuse prevention efforts and to reduce binge drinking by implementing a social influence campaign. After an initial study of binge drinking at NIU, results indicated that 43% of its students participated in binge drinking. One of the most consistent results from the study, and also mimicked by nationwide studies, is that regardless of the drinker, students thought that other students on campus drank more than they did. At NIU, where the actual binge drinking rate was 43%, students indicated that their perception was that 69% of students participated in binge drinking. If students believe that "everyone else is binge drinking" than the binge drinking rates are likely to rise because of the influence that "everyone else is drinking." Whether it is accurate or not, the perceptions of drinking norms have a strong influence on current and future drinking behaviors and they eventually become self-fulfilling prophecies (Haines, 1996).

Overcoming these social norms to binge drinking is a daunting task. If the social perceptions of binge drinking were to change, the actual binge drinking rate may drop. NIU used this premise in designing its social influence campaign. For several weeks, an advertisement was printed in the student newspaper saying, "Most NIU students (55%) drink five or fewer drinks when they party." This message was reinforced through classroom speakers, posters and students called the Money Brothers. The Money Brothers were hired to approach groups of students in cafeterias and ask, "Who knows how many drinks most NIU students drink when they party?" The student who was the first to give the correct answer is given one dollar and the other students were given flyers with the message printed on them. The Money Brothers approached 100 students during the year. Also, student workers randomly visited residence hall rooms and when they found a room with the campaign poster up, they gave the student $5, with $200 awarded during the entire year (Haines, 1996).

The impact of the social influence campaign at NIU was positive. The perception of binge drinking on campus dropped 18% and there was a 16% reduction in actual binge drinking on campus. NIUs Social Influence Campaign used social marketing to change perceptions about campus drinking with messages that illuminate positive and moderate drinking norms (Haines, 1996). Perhaps social influence campaigns on other campuses could have positive results and decrease the binge drinking rate nationwide.

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This project has been funded in part with Federal funds from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under the contract number RR-99-00-0036. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.